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AUTHOR	Imel, Susan
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ABSTRACT

The objectives of adult civic education were examined, and recommendations for its effective practice were offered to educators. The following purposes of adult civic education were discussed: inform learners of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship; explain how citizens participate in building a society by making informed decisions; and foster development of action designed to seek solutions to situations. The need for adult civic education programs to encompass the following interrelated domains of learning was emphasized: cognitive (information); affective (values); and action. The principles and problems of the liberal and radical approaches to adult civic education were reviewed along with a "third way" or philosophical orientation that supports the development of reflexive citizenship involving self-critical and dynamic learning and active citizenship and supports individuals as they learn to deal with diversity in politics and social practices. The following recommendations were offered to practitioners: (1) determine the underlying philosophical approach to adult education; (2) use an approach that focuses on learning as construction rather than as instruction; (3) use methods that encourage critical thinking, discussion, listening, and reflection; (4) create a context within the learning environment that models the kind of society that learners are working to achieve; and (5) connect with issues in which learners have a personal interest. (Contains 16 references.) (MN)

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Susan Imel

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

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PRACTICE APPLICATION BRIEF

NO. 30

by Susan Imel
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Adult Civic Education

Since democracy is the context and the condition for everything else that is valued—work, family life, religion, politics, recreation, and leisure—preserving its vitality and integrity must be a central objective of adult education. (Boggs 1991b, p. 54).

In a democratic society, adults are frequently confronted with situations and events that require them to make decisions, not only about their own lives as citizens but also about their role as a citizen in a larger community. The answers to dilemmas facing adults in today's world are not clear cut and require the ability to struggle with understanding ideas that are subtle and multifaceted, to engage in serious talk with others, and to take action (Colby et al. 2003; C. Seaquist 2003, p. 11). Since September 11, for example, individuals have had to decide what it means when the "government announces 'specific and credible' clues of a possible terrorist attack" within the United States (L. Seaquist 2003, p. 11). Should they cancel plans for a vacation? Should they stay home and cover their windows with plastic using duct tape? Should they carry on as usual? Furthermore, they also have had to decide if the information itself is credible since being able to interpret intelligence is now a part of being a citizen (ibid.). How can adult education support adults as they struggle with what it means to be a citizen in an increasingly complex world? This ***Brief*** examines the role of adult civic education in contemporary society and provides recommendations for its practice.

Adult Civic Education: What

Adult civic education, sometimes called adult education for democracy or citizenship education, has a number of purposes and helps individuals carry out both vertical (between the individual and the state) and horizontal (between individuals and groups and communities) aspects of citizenship (Keogh 2003). It involves not only learning about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (e.g., voting), but also about how one participates in building a society by making informed decisions through dialogue, reflection, and deliberation (Boggs 1991a; ***Democracy and Peace*** 1999; Nash 1999). It moves beyond helping learners acquire information and knowledge to fostering the development of action designed to seek solutions to situations (Klaassen 2000). Equipped for the Future, a project of the National Institute for Literacy, for example, organizes content standards for the role of citizen/community member around four broad areas of responsibility as follows: "become and stay informed, form and express opinions and ideas, work together, and take action to strengthen communities" (http://novel.nifl.gov/lincs/collections/eff/eff_comm.html).

Embedded in most definitions of civic education is the assumption that through participation adults will develop or adapt attitudes and values and make moral judgments related to their roles as citizens (Boggs 1991a; Colby et al. 2003; Keogh 2003; Klaassen 2000). However, Boggs (1991a,b) believes that adult educators should not put themselves in the position of advocating for particular choices, a position that is contrary to those who hold with a radical philosophy of adult education (Johnson 1999; Keogh 2003).

Ideally, adult civic education programs should encompass the three interrelated domains of *cognitive* (information), *affective* (values), and *action* (Boggs 1991b; Keogh 2003). The cognitive or information domain helps adults acquire information about legal, political, and complex local and national issues. The affective (values) domain helps adults develop the capacity to make ethical and value choices through moral reasoning as well as interpersonal skills and understanding of cultural, political, and social differences. Since the primary purpose of adult civic education is to help adults learn to be "morally responsible actors" (Boggs 1991b, p. 52), the action domain assists them in acquiring the ability to act and engage in public debate about issues of importance to them.

Adult Civic Education: Why

Preparing adults for their roles as citizens in a democracy has long been a purpose of adult education in the United States (Nash 1999). Interacting in today's pluralistic society that is characterized by diversity and fragmentation requires a skilled citizenry, and adult educators have a role in helping adults construct meaning and develop their values related to effective citizenship (Klaassen 2000). "By learning to participate in value-oriented discussions which take into account the ways in which other groups of people, other cultures, nations and ethnic groups see things, they can develop their own political and moral personalities" (ibid., p. 232).

Although civic education has played a role in U.S. adult education for well over a century, that has not been its major purpose. Boggs (1991b), however, believes that the primary purpose of adult education in a democracy—above all other purposes—should be civic education, for "no democratic nation can solve its problems and exercise world leadership unless its citizens possess civic competence" (p. 46). The challenge, as Boggs sees it, is integrating the knowledge and skills required for effective citizen responsibilities into all forms of adult education.

Adult Civic Education: How

Citizenship education is never neutral because it is shaped by the philosophical orientation of its providers as well as the institutional and community contexts in which it takes place (Keogh 2003). Programs that focus solely on information provide knowledge about citizenship and its rights and obligations and reflect a minimalist interpretation of citizenship education. On the other hand, those that develop critical thinking, encourage reflection, discussion, independent thinking, and participation support a maximal interpretation of citizenship education (Evans 2000; Keogh 2003). Educators need to be clear about which interpretation of citizenship education they wish to adopt and that the version chosen is "consistent with [their] wider educational values and vision of what is required for the ethical advancement of society and the state" (Evans 2000, p. 158).

In adult education, a variety of philosophical orientations shape not only what interpretation is chosen but also how civic education is implemented. Adult civic education that is influenced by a liberal and humanistic philosophy provides information and knowledge that learners can use however they choose, either individually or collectively (Johnson 1999; Keogh 2003). Since radical adult education promotes education for change, it tends to take a maximum approach to civic education and provides learners with knowledge and tools that they can use to challenge and change situations and institutions that they perceive to be unjust (ibid.).

Johnson (1999) finds problems with both liberal and radical approaches to adult civic education. She feels that the liberal tradition has not sufficiently challenged mainstream education and that the radical tradition "has been guilty of staying out on the margins and 'preaching to the converted'" (ibid., p. 4). Radical adult educators have also been accused of denying learners their independence by indoctrinating them into taking action or particular positions (Keogh 2003). Using the work of Giddens (1998) as a basis, Johnson (1999) proposes a "third way" or philosophical orientation that is more congruent with a con-

temporary society characterized by new social movements and a greater focus on learning (Keogh 2003). "'Third-way' adult education supports the development of reflexive citizenship involving self-critical and dynamic learning and active citizenship for involvement and action in civil society" (ibid., p. 15). The third-way approach supports individuals as they learn to deal with the diversity in politics and social practices that are hallmarks of today's world (Klaassen 2000).

Recommendations for Practice

Much adult civic education occurs informally in the community without the direct assistance of an adult educator. When it is part of a structured learning environment, the following recommendations can be used to guide practice.

- **Determine the underlying philosophical approach to adult education.** Beliefs about the role and purposes of adult education will determine how adult civic education is planned and implemented. Programs that take a minimum approach with its primary focus on providing information about citizenship and its rights and obligations may want to team with another program or instructors to lead learners through the affective and action phases that constitute an integrated, holistic approach to civic education.

- **Use an approach that focuses on learning as construction rather than as instruction.** Learners need the opportunity to struggle with questions and issues related to their citizen roles and develop or construct their own knowledge about these. This process helps them move beyond superficial understanding of civic issues and questions and enables them to form their own opinions and judgments that are based on more than "what other people think" (Colby et al. 2003; Keogh 2003).

- **Use methods that encourage critical thinking, discussion, listening, and reflection.** As a part of constructing knowledge about their roles as citizens, learners need the opportunity to engage in critical thinking, discussion, and reflection as a way of forming their own opinions and formulating solutions (Boggs 1991b; Colby et al. 2003; Klaassen 2000; Mathijessen and van Raak 2002; Welton 2002). The role of listening is often overlooked but is an important part of developing a sense of justice and is connected to critical thinking and reflection (Welton 2002).

- **Create a context within the learning environment that models the kind of society that learners are working to achieve.** The learning environment should feature democratic structures and relationships among all learners and teachers. A sense of community should be fostered, with power shared equally and with space for open discussion in which all can participate without fear of reprisal (Keogh 2003; Mathijessen and van Raak 2002; Nash 1999).

- **Connect with issues in which learners have a personal interest or stake.** Learners need to have a personal connection or stake in the area or issue that is being studied (Nash 1999). If they see a connection to their lives or the lives of those about whom they care, they will be more highly motivated and the depth of learning will be greater (Colby et al. 2003). Current events that directly affect the lives of learners are abundant. The challenge for adult educators is weaving them into existing curriculum and connecting them to their academic goals (Nash 1999).

Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus OH 43210-1090

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